

Once More on *Irony* - A Benefit Performance*

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*Will there ever be another – safe – ‘age of irony’?
Did one ever really exist?
(Linda Hutcheon)*

Irony has become one of the central topics in critical writings recently and our age seems to be dedicated to the narrative of irony. Departing – or rather, growing out of – the conventional ‘saying something but meaning something else’ definition, we cannot avoid ‘ironising’, and irony is thematised in post-postmodern literary theory, in philosophy and in literature from the 80s. Since 2000 several interesting works have been published that are concerned with the problems of irony.¹ Professor Prickett in his stimulating book, *Narrative, Religion and Science (Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999)* claims that today we experience the overwhelming importance of story-telling in science, theology and philosophy. Instead of ‘grand narratives’ and ‘Grand Theories’, we are offered ‘just-so stories’ as our postmodern age “embraces [...] pluralism [...] meanings, rather than meaning” (17). Besides echoing Lyotard’s famous definition of postmodern as ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’, he also emphasises that irony is “endemic to narrative, and to the so-called grand narratives in particular” (38).

In her *Irony* Claire Colebrook undertakes a mission (impossible) when she writes a critical guide on irony, ‘the rhetorical trap’, ‘the trope of tropes’, or ‘infinite absolute negativity’ – only to mention a few of its famous labels. She was asked by John Drakakis, the editor of the New Critical Idiom series to provide “a handy, explanatory guide to the use (and abuse) of the term” offering an overview and a cultural context in a clear and lively style with lots of examples – recalling the editor’s credo in his “Preface” (vii). Having written her doctoral dissertation on irony titled *The Concept of Irony with (Continual) Reference to Kierkegaard*, the reviewer was really enthusiastic about

* Although I planned to review the chosen book, Claire Colebrook’s *Irony* (The New Critical Idiom. London: Routledge, 2004, 195 pp.) in 2006, I was not able to finish it. Consequently, in the present text I do not only write about *Irony*, but also about the irony of my hesitation in writing about *Irony*.

¹ See, for instance, Stuart Sim, *Irony and Crisis* (London: Icon, 2002); Stephen Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science - Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002); Claire Colebrook, *Irony in the Work of Philosophy* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); and, of course, the reviewed book, Colebrook’s *Irony* (London and New York: Routledge) from 2004.

Colebrook's little book on irony.² More precisely, it is not only simply enthusiasm, but mixed with a kind of awesome respect since I reckon that only a maniac dare discuss irony, its types and 'history'. Reading the titles of the chapters, we can think that Colebrook had the ability to control irony mapping its rhetorical, philosophical and literary territories. We can see that the first five chapters (roughly) try to give a historical account of the different types of irony: the first two are centered on the original philosophical meaning of the term, the middle two are concerned with literature, and the fifth provides different focuses in its discussion. The final three chapters concentrate on the relation of irony and the other forms of the comic because satire, humour and parody are investigated together with irony. Although the structure seems 'plausible', reading the individual chapters, we should realise that irony prevails and escapes the discussion of 'its' *use and abuse*.

The first introductory chapter together with the second on Plato and Socrates is supposed to give an overview of the complexity of the concept, where the author is more or less successful.³ In spite of the haphazard remarks and the puzzle-like quality of the work, it provides interesting ideas. One of Colebrook's most instructive remarks is that "[i]rony [...] by the very simplicity of its definition becomes curiously indefinable" (1), which makes the whole history of 'ironology' impossible. Moreover, she clearly sees how the original Greek *eironeia* was distorted and closed up in the concept of *ironia*, the rhetorical figure, by the Roman orators. While the latter became well-known in Quintilian's 'saying something but meaning the opposite', the former, Socratic irony was a more complex verbal and ethical-pedagogical practice of dissimulation aimed at distancing from fixed positions and at the (re)questioning of values and definitions. Following this path of reasoning, Colebrook calls attention to the ironic potentialities hidden in all meanings, contexts and narratives. As she says, "[r]eading ironically means, in complex ways, not taking things at their word; it means looking beyond standard use and exchange to what this or that might *really mean*" (4) – and she ironises/italicises the *real meaning*

² The context of my research is given by my doctoral thesis on irony, where I studied several ironological (irony-theoretical) texts of primary importance as the term has a fascinating history starting from its earliest appearance in the Greek philosophers', Plato's and Aristotle's, then in the Roman rhetoricians', Cicero's and Quintilian's works through the Jena Romantics' and Hegel's fragmentary statements to Kierkegaard's outstanding doctoral dissertation (and life-work). In the last part I discussed the irony-conceptions of New Criticism and deconstruction relying on mainly Cleanth Brooks's and Paul de Man's ironological writings.

³ Although the origin of irony is discussed in a detailed way and important insights are given, some convincing links are missing in its pseudo-history. For instance, the concept, *eironeia*, is more strongly related to the Greek comic figure, the *eirōn*, than it is stated, or rather referred to. Examining the list of references, the reviewer has the feeling that the primary sources (for instance, Aristotle's works) are chosen randomly. Moreover, it is totally incomprehensible why the really important secondary sources – mainly, Vlastos's works – were not studied in a more thorough way. The deeper understanding of the Socratic *eironeia* and its distortion, or efforts made at its understanding in Aristotle's, Theophrastos's, Cicero's, and Quintilian's works, could have helped to find a lucid framework of the discussion and to define the (later) types of the concept. We should admit that – as usually – irony does its job very well.

of the statement. As a result, in different contexts, a text can go beyond its original intent and conventions; for instance, Plato's anti-ironic wise *Symposium* about love can be read as an ironic text because it *ironically* displays the true nature of the Socratic dialogue depicting an ironic Eros (31). In her final remark on Socrates, Colebrook presents the Greek philosopher as the proto-ironist, as the *figure* of irony: "He [Socrates] disrupts conventions and opinions by suggesting a higher moral truth, but in refusing to state just what this truth is he leaves us in a position of perpetual reading: for Socrates is a *figure* to be interpreted, an enigma presenting contradictory possibilities" (37. Italics are mine).

The author also tries to classify ironies – such as cosmic, dramatic or tragic irony, verbal, stable vs. unstable irony – but she does not go beyond simply mentioning of the conventional types, and does not really make a distinction between their meanings (13-15). Instead, she moves towards a more problematic definition of irony emphasising its political and ethical dimensions related to the ironic tensions implied in language. However, the real meaning of her vague warning against/in our postmodern age in the first chapter becomes explicit only in the last section of the book, where she criticises the male violence of the deconstructive irony in Rorty's, Derrida's and de Man's works.

After the first two philosophical chapters, in the third and fourth Colebrook focuses on the theorising of irony. She discusses the Jena Romantics' - the Schlegel brothers', Tieck's, Solger's, and Novalis's - ideas on irony embedded in their vision about 'New Poesy'. The Early German Romantics demanded poetry in all fields of life, and they wanted to create themselves making their life 'poetic' (cf. Greek *poiesis* means 'making'). Consequently, they regarded human life as continuous becoming in the process of self-creation and self-destruction, that is, they saw human life ironic as it is "*essentially* capable of being other than any fixed *essence*" (48., italics in the original). It is not by chance that their favourite form of writing was the fragment, and they also imitated Socratic dialogue claiming the perfect dissimulation of Socratic irony.

In the same chapter titled "Romantic Irony", besides theorising about irony, Colebrook moves towards literature referring to several writers' rather different works so as to show the versatility of their irony. The Jena Romantics themselves tended to evaluate the great writers; for instance, they frequently found their ironic examples in Shakespeare's, Goethe's, Sterne's, and Diderot's works. But instead of referring to the 'classics', Colebrook presents new examples and draws striking parallels creating strange pairs. Thus, Swift is placed next to Blake regarding their similar though rarely discussed criticism of human reason (60-61), while on the basis of Swift's criticism of satire, he is paired with Byron.

In the analysis of Blake's songs Colebrook pays attention to the 'performative contradiction' of the speaking voice. His "London", for instance, gives direct social criticism while the voice ironises its own disillusioned tone emphasised by the ironic repetition of the word *every* (57-58). We can take it as a contradiction, but I suggest reading it as an example of the complexity of

Blake's irony expressed in the different tones of his voices. Looking for a Colebrookian 'performative contradiction', I would rather refer to the contradictory ironic 'so' used *so* frequently in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* when the voice logically and slavishly follows and accepts another way of thinking and value-system without really questioning it. However, later, in connection with "The Tyger" (which ironically, or in the German Romantic spirit, is quoted fragmentarily with the last two stanzas missing!), she admits that "[t]here is no single coherent voice in Blake's work. Like the Socratic dialogues invoked by the German Romantics, it is in the multiplicity of voices that life is opened up for question, no longer reducible to any of its expressions" (66).

In the chapters and subchapters on irony of literary works, one of Colebrook's most interesting ideas that actually characterises the whole book is concerned with the ways of overcoming irony. In the case of Blake and Swift, not only is the pair ill-matched but also the explanation of the matching is dismissed, while in the chapter "Beyond Irony and Subjectivity: Byron and Swift", some great insights are revealed. Starting from the subjectivising power of Romantic irony, Colebrook points out how Swift was able to go beyond the scope of his satire on humanity even satirising the satirical voice with his irony. She discusses that Swift is both satirical and ironic in *Gulliver's Travels*: on the one hand, in Gulliver's voyages, through his voice, humanity is criticised, and on the other hand, Gulliver's 'gullibility' and the limitation of satire is also attacked (85-89). Going one step further, in his satirical *Don Juan* Byron turns against Romantic irony and Augustan satire playing them off against each other while showing their limitations. As is summed up in a later passage: "Byron combined irony and satire [...] he used satire to debunk all the high ideals of Romantic striving, all the ideals of an elevated poetry. On the other hand, he used irony against a certain satirical tendency" (113-4). Here another topic is introduced, namely, the connection between irony and satire, which will be discussed in details in the last part of the book, where irony is analysed in its relation to satire, humour and parody.

The two chapters concerned with irony in literature are followed by the 'deconstructive' "Irony out of Context", where Derrida's, Nietzsche's and de Man's ideas are highlighted. Actually, this chapter is the least successful because in 15 pages Colebrook tries to cover such difficult problems as the origin of post-structural irony in Nietzsche's 'genealogies', or, the Derridean irony of impossibility implicit in narratives and in his 'aconceptual' concept, *différance*. About de Man's allegory and irony not much is said, though we do learn that de Man "turns back to Romantic irony and gives it a post-structuralist twist" (110). According to Colebrook, in deconstruction romantic irony becomes all-consuming, while all meanings, texts and contexts are potentially ironic. Therefore, she suggests thinking beyond irony and offers some ways out of deconstructive ironising.

I think, ironically, the best part of *Irony* is when the author discusses the ways and practices of going beyond irony. As I have mentioned, in the first 5 chapters only haphazard remarks indicate this intention, while in the last three

chapters Colebrook tries to open up new dimensions in the understanding and overpowering of irony. Referring back, or going on the path paved by Swift's ironic satire and Byron's satirical irony (plus, McGann's related books⁴), she calls attention to how satire is concerned with theories of man, while irony with theories of subject (119). Here she also suggests that "the task of a post-ironic ethics cannot be a return to satire" (ibid). This statement, on the one hand, clearly shows how Colebrook mixes different categories taken from different human fields (cf. literature, linguistics, philosophy, ethics), which, otherwise, could be exciting with sufficient explanation given in a well-organised structure of study. On the other hand, she articulates again a desirable plan for the future: we should go beyond irony and leave behind satire as well. It is not a surprise that in the last section of the chapter "Satire and the Limits of Irony", the feminist Judith Butler's "parodic and performative step" is elaborated, namely, she analyses how our real selves are constructed and performed in the *system* of language, of society, and community (126-7). I do not want to simply enlarge the list of systems with logic, reason, grammar, and cultural context but I should underline the importance of parody in the brief discussion of Butler's ideas, which will be the topic of the very last chapter titled "Postmodernism, Parody and Irony: Rorty, Hutcheon, Austen, Joyce and Carter".

But before the postmodern chaos of the last chapter, in "Humour and Irony: Deleuze and Gattari", which is obviously her best chapter, Colebrook overtly attacks irony and concentrates on humour that can lead us out of the labyrinth of 'meanings meaning other meanings'. The reader should realise that in this section Colebrook is absolutely in her playground (which definitely *should* be outside the domain of irony), as in 2002 she published a thorough monograph on *Gilles Deleuze* in the Routledge Critical Thinkers series. Relying on Deleuze's irony-criticism, her main point is that while intellectual irony is concerned with the depths of meaning in the ascent of thinking, bodily humour traditionally focuses on sensible singularities in the descent of laughter (132-135). Humour takes you closer to the depths of life as it shows the flows of becoming, while fixing a viewpoint, irony "strives to create a concept of the subject as such – that point from which all concepts emerge" (138). That is, 'reactive' irony freezes life and active humour frees it. Accordingly, irony "delimits human life by positing an elevated concept that is not realised" (145); that is, irony is life-denying and powerful like the unseen law. Opposed to it, satire is related to humour as it examines life displaying either the animalism of man (in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*), or human follies and weakness (e.g. in Jane Austen's novels). Moreover, Colebrook shows the greatness of Swift "anticipating the problems of irony; [adopting] a position of subjectivity above and beyond life [that] is not only the creation of an image of reason, it is also a reaction against

⁴ Colebrook frequently refers to McGann's works, sometimes without giving the exact source. But in her "References", she lists McGann's *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) and his *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

the forces of bodies” (148). Although this chapter on humour is the most inspiring in the book, it has not much to do with the theory of irony.

The last chapter is dedicated to postmodernism and, I think, is the least coherent in the whole book. Besides experiencing the complexity of our post-postmodern age, we can also *sense* Colebrook’s strengthening feminist voice. Three out of the five presented writers are female and the selection of two philosophers and three novelists seems rather weird resulting again in ill-matched pairs. Austen and Joyce are forced into the awkward “Free-indirect Style” sub-chapter, while Linda Hutcheon is recalled to ‘master’ Rorty’s male ironism. The ‘ill-treated’ philosopher Richard Rorty in his *Contingency, Solidarity and Irony* (1989) expresses the universality of irony emphasising the importance of multivocality and the lack of a final, single *vocabulary*. A person’s (final) vocabulary contains the words in which he tells the story of his life, while an ironist is aware of the contingency of her and others’ final vocabulary. I deliberately use ‘she’ in my vocabulary here so as to follow Rorty’s path as he emphatically refers to the ironist as ‘she’. Thus, according to Rorty, the ironist “(1) has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself”.⁵ I should admit, Colebrook is right stating that the ironist’s position is ‘meta-stable’, but I cannot accept her criticism of Rorty’s “violent and masculinist” irony. Drawing parallels between Rorty’s ideas and, for instance, Ellis’s *American Psycho* or Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* is striking and flattering but not convincing. Although all of them are contextualised in the ironic spirit of our age, we cannot blame Rorty expressing views that can easily be distorted to become the credo of “the white male subject of capitalism” (158). Moreover, I think, Colebrook’s chosen opponent, Hutcheon seems rather naive to call the attention to the political and ethical force inherent in irony, while, relying on the responsibility of the West, she asks for the rejection of the gesture of irony. Then the novelist Angela Carter is given a separate section simply titled as “Angela Carter”, which does not help the reader find the missing link. Similarly to the feminist Andrea Dworkin, who attacks pornography actually repeating its sexual discourse (*Pornography: Men Possessing Women*), Carter re-writes, or rather violates, classical fairy tales. In her collection, *The Bloody Chamber*, though the narratives are embedded in masculine constructions, female voices are adopted telling ‘their’ stories of being created, used and abused by male desire.

Despite the opening up of feminist dimensions, the conclusion, being shorter than a page, together with the clumsy “Glossary” is rather puzzling. In the end the author seems to heighten the postmodern reader’s discomfort when

⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 73.

she concludes that irony is inescapable in the world of discourses. Quoting from a lengthy passage of her conclusion:

We can only read texts ironically, seeing the tensions and relations between what is said and not-said, what is and is not the case, if we commit ourselves to a sense and truth towards which speech and language strive. [...] Irony can, then, neither be achieved nor overcome. One cannot remain in a naively postmodern position above and beyond any discourse. (177)

Moreover, as we know from Paul de Man, irony escapes its being thematised in critical writings and “any theory of irony is the undoing, the necessary undoing, of any theory of narrative”.⁶ However, we cannot do anything else but try working on theories keeping it in mind that our theory “will always be interrupted, always be disrupted, always be undone by the ironic dimension which it will necessary contain” (ibid.). If someone wants to elaborate on irony, she should play on its own ground letting its rhetoric work. Consequently, to avoid making futile attempts at overcoming its power, the reviewer had better dis-simulate *and so* play along giving *free* way to ironic display.

⁶ Paul de Man, “The Concept of Irony,” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 179.